

Opening Statement
Chairman Dan Burton
Committee on International Relations
Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere &
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations
Title: Year Two of Castro's Brutal Crackdown on Dissidents
Date: March 3, 2005

As Chairman of the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, and long-standing critic of the Castro regime, I would like to thank Chairman Smith and Ranking Member Payne for working with Mr. Menendez and I to put on this joint hearing today; and help us highlight once again the atrocious human rights violations the Cuban people continue to suffer at the hands of Castro's oppressive regime.

I believe this hearing is especially timely, for two reasons. First, we are approaching the two-year anniversary of the most brutal attempt yet by the Castro regime to crush the efforts by the Cuban people to achieve a free and democratic Cuba. By holding this hearing today we are sending a strong message to the Cuban government that the United States will not forget those people who are languishing in Cuban prisons for the so-called crime of speaking out against the injustices perpetrated by the Castro regime.

Second, as U.S. servicemen and women put their lives on the line to bring freedom and democracy to areas of the world that have long suffered in the shadow of tyranny, Cuba represents a prime example – right in our own backyard - of what can happen if any Nation shuns democracy and subjugates itself to the whims of dictatorship.

Next week (March 9th), my Subcommittee will hold a hearing to examine the overall State of Democracy in Latin America. It is the intention of the Subcommittee to determine the strengths and weaknesses of democracy in our hemisphere, and I believe that an understanding of the situation in Cuba is key to our understanding of the current state of democracy in parts of our Hemisphere.

As it stands now, Cuba is the only nation in the hemisphere that is a complete dictatorship, and since the earliest days of the regime, Castro has not only stifled efforts to promote freedom and democracy in Cuba, but he has also actively been involved in promoting communism and dictatorships around the world, most especially in Central and South America. The fall of Castro's principle benefactor, the Soviet Union, may have caused a shift in Castro's tactics but he has never abandoned his ambition to export communism. In fact, in an August 2003 policy report, the Hudson Institute offered evidence that the Cuban government was providing assistance to the Chavez regime in Venezuela in an effort to turn that democratic country into a socialist dictatorship. Tragically, it seems that their sinister efforts may be bearing fruit as just last Friday President Chavez publicly and vocally embraced socialism as his ideology of choice.

The inauguration of Uruguay's first leftist president, Tabare Vazquez, just this past Tuesday marks a continuation of South America's political shift leftward. Only hours

after receiving the presidential sash, President Vazquez moved to restore diplomatic relations with Cuba.

I am very concerned about the state of affairs in the Western Hemisphere and I am convinced that there will never be true lasting peace and freedom in the region until we solve the Cuba problem once and for all; and the only acceptable solution is a free and democratic Cuba.

We cannot ignore Castro and we cannot relieve the pressure on the regime. We owe it to the thousands of Cubans who risk their lives every year to flee the communist regime by any means necessary – even attempting to brave the hazardous 90-mile crossing between the United States and Cuba on makeshift rafts – as well as those languishing in Cuban jails to further open the eyes of the world community to the true evils of the Castro regime.

Today's hearing, and the resolution we will mark-up later this afternoon, send an important message to freedom loving people in Cuba, and indeed everywhere, that the United States stands ready with them to promote freedom and democracy for all; that we will never forget them, and we will not walk away until the job is done. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses.